

12/17/92 (pg.6)

Shortgrass Country

by Monte Noelke

Publicity on the Christmas at Fort Concho in San Angelo spreads farther every year. Airline magazines and Texas booster periodicals pitch the events in a big way. Travel agents and hotel clerks delight in posting the celebration on their coffee tables.

On opening night last week a preliminary party and play entertained the board of directors and financial supporters of the fort. Things felt right lively as carolers sang outdoors and cowboy poets recited in the old rock halls.

My great grandfather and great grandmother moved in the 1870s to be closer to this very garrison due to the Comanche trouble in the country. His picture hangs on a rich wall in Barracks 5.; Grandmother is left out.

Perhaps she's ignored because after she put a bunch of drunken buffalo soldiers to flight off the front porch of her hotel with a double barreled shotgun, she crossed the Concho River and told the commanding officer he was going to be held responsible for his trooper's behavior around her place. His honor might have been mighty slow learning the redman's language, but he probably understood plenty quick a promise backed by a sawed off shotgun, cradled under the arm of a frontiersman's wife.

When no one was watching, I sidled up to Great Grandfather's picture to check our resemblance. We sure don't look at all alike. But modern ranchers age faster than those old settlers did. The only fences he had to repair were his horse corrals. If the springs failed at his cabin, the next week wasn't wasted pulling pipe and breaking sucker rods apart. His sleep may have been interrupted on the nights the Comanches broke his saddle horses loose, but wasn't ruined by jet airplanes and train whistles.

An old friend and his wife walked up just as I moved away from the picture. "Sure don't make 'em now like they did in those days," they chorused.

"Takes mighty little to thin the bloodline down in this age of soft pickup seats and tinted windshields," the man said.

No sense in trying to change preconceived notions in the hardheaded herders. Great Grandpa made mistakes. Like on the day before the ill-fated Dove Creek battle, he fed the starving Indians all the honey they were able to scoop out of wooden barrels with their hands. Naturally, the next day when they were matched against the renegade whites, the honey underneath the braves' fingernails slowed them knocking their arrows so bad and caused so many shafts to go astray, the day was lost for his friends the Lipans before the first shot shattered the air.

Walking back to the pickup across the compound late on a still winter night, you keep waiting to hear harness chains rattle as caissons are hitched up, or a guard to shout his station over by the horse corral.

Merry are Christmas nights at the fort, today as way back then. Grandfather's buffalo rifle still stands in a closet of his family. Nobody knows, however, what happened to Grandmother's shotgun, or at least I don't.